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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extent to which alternative education can meet the needs of disconnected youth who are at risk of economic and social hardship. It summarizes characteristics of disconnected youth, risk factors associated with disconnection, and characteristics of students in selected alternative education settings. The most common factors used to characterize disconnected youth relate to individual education and employment activity. The paper notes variations in disconnection by race and by state and distinguishes between short- and long-term disconnection. It discusses characteristics related to four areas: school completion and dropping out; teen pregnancy and parenting; involvement in the juvenile justice system; and leaving the foster care system. There are no consistent estimates of the number of youth in alternative education programs or schools, although there are survey data on youth enrolled in alternative education in or through public, private, and Catholic K-12 schools. Overall, mainstream education and public systems are not adequately meeting the needs of all high risk youth. Typical populations of students in alternative schools are dropouts, students with disabilities, and students engaging in health risk behaviors. Having students enrolled in alternative settings provides opportunities to reach out to them, address their needs, and help them reconnect to their education. (Contains 38 references.) (SM)

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VULNERABLE YOUTH: IDENTIFYING THEIR NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Janine M. Zweig

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VULNERABLE YOUTH: IDENTIFYING THEIR NEED FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Adolescence is a time of transition and change. It is a time when youth work toward educational and vocational goals, take on exciting new responsibilities, and prepare for their transition to adulthood. Most youth move through adolescence experiencing little or no adversity and successfully transition into adult roles and responsibilities. However, this is not the case for all of America's youth. A proportion of America's youth struggle to achieve developmental goals during adolescence and become disconnected from mainstream institutions and systems—including schools. Their day-to-day lives are very different than the typical American adolescent. These youth are vulnerable to further failures and continued disconnection from society, often resulting in lifelong economic and social hardship.

Alternative schools and programs may be a source of both disconnection from and reconnection to mainstream institutions. Some schools may use alternative education options as ways to remove youth who are disciplinary problems and/or unable to meet standards set by testing environments. On the other hand, some alternative education approaches attempt to meet the needs of disconnected and vulnerable youth and represent one way to reconnect them to society.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which alternative education schools and programs can meet the needs of the nation's vulnerable youth. The characteristics of youth facing disconnection from society are summarized, as are the risk factors associated with disconnection and the characteristics of students in selected alternative education settings. While there are currently no consistent or comprehensive data on the number of youth who could potentially benefit from alternative education or the number currently being served by alternative education schools and programs, rough estimates (based on existing data) are presented to provide a sense of the magnitude of need.

DISCONNECTED YOUTH

A portion of America's youth are not connected to society through mainstream public systems and agencies or in meaningful ways that are markers of important developmental transitions throughout adolescence and young adulthood. These youth are not headed on the "typical" path to adult roles and responsibilities. By "atypical" we do not mean youth who merely express their individuality but instead we mean a group of youth who are currently struggling to be successful in their roles as adolescents and who are socially, educationally, and economically disadvantaged relative to their peers. These are youth who are not connected to education, employment, or organizations that prepare them for successful adulthood. In defining vulnerable or disconnected youth, researchers variously focus on teenagers alone or teens plus young adults. Similarly, many empirical studies analyze specific adolescent development issues and risk factors, while most

policy studies focus on measurable factors that can be used to understand the extent of disconnection.

The most common factors used to characterize disconnected youth relate to individual education and employment activity. In 2001, 9 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 years were not enrolled in school and were not working (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2002). Black and Hispanic youth were more likely to be disconnected from education and employment than white youth. Fourteen percent of black youth and 13 percent of Hispanic youth were disconnected as compared to 6 percent of white youth. The percent of disconnected youth of all races, however, has been declining throughout the last decades.

Variations in disconnection also occur by state. For example, in 1999 when 8 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 years – or about 1.3 million teenagers - were not attending school and were not working, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska had the lowest proportion of youth not attending school and not working (4 percent — Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). Arkansas, and Mississippi had relatively higher proportions (12 percent). The District of Columbia had an even higher rate of disconnection, with 15 percent of its youth not connected to employment or education.

Besharov and Gardiner (1999) expanded the definition of disconnection by also considering military service and marital status, broadening the age group of interest, and examining the duration of disconnection. Their definition of disconnection identified disconnected youth who were not enrolled in school, who were not employed, who were not in the military, and who were not married to someone who met at least one of these criteria for 26 weeks or more in a one year period. The researchers found that more than one third of 16 to 23 year olds (representing about 5 million young persons) were disconnected during one calendar year and many go through periods of disconnection. This number captures both relatively advantaged youth, such as those that might have graduated from college and who are not working yet, as well as disadvantaged youth.

The researchers distinguish between short- and long-term disconnection to further clarify the nature of it. Twenty-four percent of males and females experienced short-term disconnection – that is, for one to two years – while 13 percent of males and 14 percent of female's experienced long-term disconnection of three years or more. Short-term disconnected youth did not suffer the serious social and/or economic problems that the long-term disconnected youth did (Besharov & Gardiner, 1999). The long-term disconnected youth were more likely to have dropped out of school, to become a parent before the age of 18, and to spend time in jail than youth who were disconnected for a short term.

Building on this work, Brown and Emig (1999) further studied long-term disconnected youth. The researchers reported the risk factors predicting long-term disconnection included: family poverty and welfare receipt, low parental education, living in single or no parent households, having a child before age 18, dropping out of high school, and having a combination of any of these risk factors. They found that 77 percent of these

young men and 89 percent of these young women had been poor at some point in their childhoods and they were 13 times more likely to be poor in early adulthood compared to their connected peers. Long-term disconnected youth were more likely than their peers to receive welfare and Food Stamps, and to be unemployed. Fifty-seven percent of the women received Aid to Families with Dependent Children and 64 percent had received Food Stamps. The men spent half of their time unemployed and the other half not seeking work (meaning they were out of the labor force). Women spent 75 percent of their time not seeking work. They also were less likely to marry than their peers and these youth remain disconnected into their late twenties.

The Ways Youth Disconnect

Youth often experience economic hardship and developmental difficulties when they disconnect from society and public systems. Disconnection can occur in a number of ways. Wertheimer and colleagues (as seen in Yohalem & Pittman, 2001) identified that 10 percent of youth are vulnerable because they are disconnected in critical ways from key societal institutions or agencies. That is, the disconnected population includes youth leaving public systems, such as foster care, juvenile justice, and welfare; youth who are or have been homeless; youth who were out of school and had not graduated; and youth with an incarcerated parent. Also, youth in families with limited English capability, such as those from immigrant families, may have less access to engage in systems that keep them connected. Issues such as these not only serve as ways youth become disconnected but also contributes to them remaining disconnected. For instance, researchers estimate that at least five percent of youth ages 12 to 17 are homeless each year (Roberston & Toro, 1999). Homelessness may not be the reason some youth disconnected from mainstream systems originally, but it certainly would contribute to them not being able to reconnect easily. To further complicate these issues, services developed to assist such youth in reconnecting to mainstream institutions are not available for all the individuals that need them (Yohalem & Pittman, 2001).

Below, the characteristics related to four areas in which youth disconnect are discussed further. Of particular interest are: school completion and dropping out; teen pregnancy and parenting; involvement in the juvenile justice system; and leaving the foster care system. Disconnection in each of these four areas make youth more vulnerable to an unsuccessful transition to adulthood and to economic hardship.

School Completion and Dropping Out

In 2000, researchers from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 10.9 percent of the 16-24 year old youth and young adults in the United States – or 3.8 million people – were not enrolled in a high school program and had not successfully completed high school (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). These out-of-school youth contribute to high youth unemployment rates (Pennington, 2003). Employers are increasingly demanding higher skills for a number of jobs that disconnected youth could

fill, however, the skills of disconnected youth are inadequate to meet such demands (Lerman, 1999).

Therefore, successfully surviving in the 21st Century economy increasingly requires that individuals not only complete high school but also obtain education beyond high school (Pennington, 2003). The skills the labor force requires to support the current economy are those typically attained in college (Pennington, 2003). Yet, many feel that the American education system is failing to educate a large number of youth through the high school level. Thirty-five percent of eighth grade students in the United States scored below the basic math level in 2000 (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002). And in 1998, only 31 percent of eighth grade students were considered proficient readers (Yohalem & Pittman, 2001). Fifteen million children are enrolled in public schools that are considered substandard (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001). Many youth are being taught by teachers who lack adequate qualifications. Children attending schools with a high concentration of poverty are more likely than children in schools with low poverty to have under-qualified teachers (Yohalem & Pittman, 2001). The same is true for children in schools with high minority populations. Evidence shows that many youth have low basic functional skills.

The Coalition for Juvenile Justice (2001) identified barriers to education both within and outside of the school system. Within school systems, one barrier to education is the unintended consequences of inflexible school discipline policies, such as zero tolerance. Other barriers to education are related to individual or family characteristics, or neighborhood contexts, such as:

- Poverty
- A poor educational start
- Community stress
- Racial/ethnic/language barriers
- Lack of adult supervision, mentors, and community supports
- Family stress and responsibility
- Learning disabilities and related conditions

The problems of school drop out are increasingly clear, but there appears to be little support for addressing these problems. Ironically, federal dollars targeted toward out-of-school youth continues to decline at the same time there is a strong research base that documents practices that work to best assist youth (Pennington, 2003). Similarly, disconnected and out-of-school youth are reportedly not a priority for the general public (Youth Development and Research Fund, 2002). Voters place most of the blame for teenage failure on their parents, with secondary blame placed with the youth themselves; only a few voters blame such failures on faulty institutions and administrators of such institutions.

To fully understand issues related to disconnection from school and how this may relate to alternative education, it is useful to examine both the rate of completing school and the rate of dropping out of school. The two rates estimate different things — completion

rates estimate school performance and dropout rates estimate student outcomes. By reviewing both sets of numbers, we can begin to understand how many youth successfully finish school and in what context this occurs. In addition, we can also assess the extent to which youth obtain degrees, GED's, and other certificates from contexts different than mainstream school settings and the need for alternative school settings.

Completing School

Estimating the number of youth that successfully finish school is difficult because researchers use different methodological definitions of school completion. According to NCES, in 2000, 86.5 percent of 18 to 24 year old young adults not enrolled in high school had successfully completed it (including attaining high school diplomas or equivalent credentials such as the GED); 91.8 percent of White young adults and 83.7 percent of African American young adults (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001).

Using a different methodology to address the extent to which high schools graduate students, Greene and Winters (2002) report somewhat lower rates of high school completion. According to Greene and Winters, 69 percent of the public school class of 2000 graduated: 79 percent of Asian students, 76 percent of White students, 57 percent of Native American students, 55 percent of African American students, 53 percent of Hispanic students. Unlike Kaufman and colleagues, Greene and Winters focus only on official high school graduation, and do not count attainment of a GED or other alternative credentials as high school completion. The authors do not include any type of credential except high school diplomas because the purpose of calculating high school completion rates is to evaluate schools not individual students. Counting youth that receive alternative credentials inflates overall percentages of high school completers and does not allow one to tease out how many youth *do not* receive diplomas in traditional high school settings. Obtaining some alternative credential or GED is surely beneficial to individuals, but particular high schools did not graduate these individuals. That is, Kaufman and colleagues document the number of individuals, ages 18 to 24, who have obtained high school credentials by whatever means by the year 2000. In contrast, Greene and Winters document the percent of youth that actually graduate with diplomas from public high schools in the year 2000.

Different stories can be told depending on which methodology is used. For example, States rank differently on overall school completion rates depending on the definition used. If States report their school completion rates using the Kaufman et al. methodology the rates are higher whereas with the Greene and Winters methodology their percent of high school graduates is lower. States that rank among those with higher completion rates with the Kaufman et al. definition drop in the rankings when using the Greene and Winters methodology.

Greene (2001) further examined high school completion rates by state and district using data from 1998. He created the same measure of graduation across location so that rates could be compared. The measure captures the percent of high school diplomas awarded in 1998 in comparison to the number of youth enrolled in 8th grade in a given school

district. The extent to which graduation rates vary within a single state becomes apparent when rates are looked at this way. For instance, Maryland's state graduation rate is 75 percent, but the rates are 54 percent in Baltimore City Public School System, 71 percent in Anne Arundel County Public Schools, 79 percent in Prince Georges County School District, and 85 percent in Montgomery County Public Schools. Michigan's state graduate rate is 75 percent, but the rates are 57 percent in Detroit City School District and 91 percent in Ann Arbor Public Schools. Ohio's state graduation rate is 77 percent, but the rates are 28 percent in Cleveland City School District and 45 Percent in Columbus City School District.

Balfanz and Legters (2001) also found that the number of youth that start high school and complete it varies from city to city (Balfanz & Legters, 2001). They measured high school completion by estimating a school's promotion power — or the percent of youth who are in school in 12th grade as compared to those that were in school in 9th grade three years earlier. They found that in the largest 35 central cities in the United States, 40 to 50 percent had a promoting power of 50 percent or less. In other words, in almost half the schools in urban areas the number of 12th graders was half or less than half the number of students enrolled in 9th grade three years earlier. Schools falling into this category were disproportionately serving minority students.

Dropping Out

In fact, according to the 2000 Census, about 11 percent of 16-19 year olds were not enrolled in school and did not have a high school diploma or GED. The percentage of high school dropouts has remained relatively stable since 1987. Asian/Pacific Islander youth had the lowest dropout rates (3.8 percent), followed by Whites (6.9 percent), African American youth (13.1 percent), and Hispanics (27.8 percent). Almost half of the Hispanic youth born outside of the United States drop out of high school. Furthermore, about five percent of all students who enter high school each year drop out within a year. Five out of every 100 youth enrolled in high school in October 1999 left school before October 2000 without successfully completing the program (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). Dropout rates vary by state (NCES), accessed April 3, 2003). In 2000, Iowa, North Dakota, and Wisconsin had the lowest dropout rates (2.5 percent, 2.7 percent, and 2.6 percent, respectively) and Louisiana had the highest dropout rate (9.2 percent).

High school dropouts experience considerable economic and social problems. More specifically, high school dropouts are 72 percent more likely to be unemployed and earn 27 percent less than those who graduate (US Department of Labor, 2003). Young adults living in families in the lowest 20 percent of the income distribution are six times more likely than their peers living in families in the highest 20 percent to have dropped out of school (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). High school dropouts are more likely to smoke cigarettes regularly, drink alcohol regularly, and use illegal drugs than their peers in grades 11 and 12 (IYD, 2002). Eighty-two percent of adult prison inmates are high school dropouts (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001) and, in 1993, 17 percent of youth under 18 entering adult prisons had not completed grade school (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997).

School Suspension and Expulsion

Some youth who leave school early do not do so voluntarily, but instead are forced to leave school. Increasingly, difficult and disruptive students are being permanently expelled from schools. Sometimes these youth continue their education in alternative settings and sometimes they do not.

A disconnection between research and policy exists (Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2001) regarding school suspensions and expulsion. Although there has been a decrease in juvenile violence in the 1990s, there also has been a simultaneous sharp increase in harsh discipline policies. In part this inverse pattern results from the *Gun Free Schools Act of 1994* which requires school districts to expel students for at least a year for bringing a firearm to school (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Zero tolerance policies have expanded as have policies regarding expulsion; increasingly districts expel students not just for carrying firearms, but also for violations such as other acts of violence and drug related infractions. As a result there has been a national explosion of suspensions and expulsions since the *Gun Free Schools Act* was passed (Dohrn, 2001) and African American and Latino students are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White counterparts (Gordon, Piana, & Keleher, 2001).

In a study of school districts that have alternative school settings for youth with discipline problems, about half listed the following *sole reasons* as sufficient for transferring students out of regular school programming: possession, distribution, or use of drugs or alcohol; physical attacks or fights; chronic truancy; continual academic failure; possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm; possession of a firearm; and disruptive verbal behavior (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). About a quarter of districts listed teen pregnancy and/or parenthood and mental health issues as *sole reasons* for transferring youth out of regular programming. Districts with high minority student enrollment and high poverty concentration were more likely than those with low minority enrollment and low to moderate poverty concentrations to transfer students from regular programming solely for possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm, alcohol or drug issues, physical fights, and disruptive verbal behavior. About three-quarters of the districts allowed all students the opportunity to return to regular school, a quarter allowed some but not all students the opportunity, and one percent did not allow students transferred from regular programming back in. Important reasons for determining whether or not youth return to regular programming include improved student behavior and attitudes and student motivation to return. Less important reasons were improved grades and student readiness based on standardized assessment scores.

While many youth expelled from traditional settings may be referred to alternative school settings, not all districts have such processes in place, meaning that students expelled due to policies such as zero tolerance do not always have alternative schools options available (Johnson, 2001). For example, during 1998-99, only 44 percent were referred to alternative school placements (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002).

Some experts note that focusing on difficult or disruptive students ignores real problems in the educational system (Gregg, 1998). Class size, teacher training, and school

leadership and organization are real challenges facing the system and by focusing on the child, these issues can be ignored. Fine and Smith (2001) report that zero tolerance strategies have not been effective because many people have been expelled from school when they do not deserve to be, the rules make school environments less creative, the policies are disproportionately imposed by race, and by easily fixing school issues by getting rid of difficult youth, the United States is filling its prisons. There is concern that focusing on problem students may create problems of equity by segregating poor, disabled, and minority students in alternative programs (Gregg, 1998). They caution that alternative schools should not become "dumping grounds" for problem students and if the goals of alternative schools are punitive in nature, the system may adopt ineffective strategies to improve learning and behavior and may threaten system equity. There should be clarity about the purpose of the school and how it is supposed to improve outcomes.

Teen Pregnancy and Parenting

Teen pregnancy and parenting is another way youth can become disconnected from society and mainstream institutions. Current statistics show the rates of teen pregnancies and births have dropped throughout the last decade, although the proportion of teens that are parents in the United States is high relative to other developed countries. In 2001, approximately 5 percent of youth reported having been pregnant or having gotten someone pregnant according to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (Grunbaum et al., 2002). In 1999, there were 29 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 17 years (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2002).

As previously noted, some schools do not allow students who are pregnant or parents to remain enrolled. Regardless of whether these policies are prevalent or not, many teen parents do not finish their education (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002), although pregnancy is not necessarily the reason for their non-completion. About four in ten teen parents have finished high school, and about half of teen parents left school prior to becoming pregnant. However, teens who have children are more likely than their counterparts to be poor and/or to end up using the welfare system. Their children are more likely to suffer from neglect, be high school dropouts themselves, and go to prison. The combination of teenage childbearing and dropping out of high school has particularly negative long-term consequences.

Involvement in the Juvenile Justice System

Youth also become disconnected from society and mainstream public institutions when they become involved in the criminal justice system. In 2000, 2.4 million youth under the age of 18 were arrested, accounting for 17 percent of all arrests (Snyder, 2002). Every day, juvenile courts around the United States handle 4,800 delinquency cases (delinquency offenses are those for which adults could be prosecuted in a criminal court – Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). A number of individual youth have more than one

delinquency case per year, meaning that although juvenile courts saw 1.8 million cases in 1996 only 1.2 million youth were represented in those cases.

A number of research studies have shown minorities are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and are treated more harshly by the system (Males & Macallair, 2000). Minority youth are more likely to be arrested than white youth and receive more severe dispositions than white youth with comparable charges. Males and Macallair (2000) found that in the state of California, minority youth are overrepresented in arrests, transfers to adult courts, sentencing, and imprisonment. Minority overrepresentation increases the further into the system. For example, minority youth are 2.7 times more likely than white youth to be arrested for a violent felony, they are 3.1 times more likely to be transferred to adult court and sentenced, and they are 8.3 times more likely to be sentenced to imprisonment by an adult court.

Many youth are detained in various justice system settings. According to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement, a one-day count of all juvenile offenders in both public and private facilities found that approximately 109,000 juvenile offenders were held in residential placement (OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book, 2002). Again, minority youth are more likely to be detained than White youth (Males & Macallair, 2000; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999; Yohalem & Pittman, 2001).

According to Department of Justice Statistics (OJJDP Profile), about 100,000 youth between the ages of 8 and 24 are in juvenile residential facilities in a given year, with the average age between 16 and 17. Facilities must continue to provide educational instruction to juvenile residents under age 18, and perhaps 80,000 16 to 18 year olds attend education programs in this setting each year.

Youth who are detained in justice facilities are already disadvantaged relative to their peers. Many incarcerated juveniles are marginally literate or illiterate and have only limited basic math skills. More than one third of such youth have reading skills below the fourth grade level. Seventeen percent of those sentenced to adult prisons have not completed grade school. At the end of their term most teens are released back to their communities and if their educational lag has not been addressed they remain unskilled and undereducated (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001)

Leaving the Foster Care System

Although most youth are in foster care for a set period of time and then cycle out of the system, some youth remain until they age out because they have become young adults (typically age 18 – Wertheimer, 2002). Leaving the foster care system by aging out represents yet another way youth can disconnect from systems that can support their development.

In 1999, nearly 20,000 foster children aged out of the system and became legally independent (nearly 33 percent of the children that left the system that year – Wertheimer, 2002). African American children disproportionately age out of the foster

care system whereas White children are underrepresented among such youth. Youth age out of foster care for a number of reasons. A large proportion of the youth who age out of foster care entered the system during adolescence. Foster children ages 14 and over rarely live in foster or pre-adoptive homes but instead are more likely to live in group homes, institutions and, in some cases, supervised independent living settings. The chances that adolescents in foster care will be adopted decreases as age increases.

Research shows that children who age out of foster care face many barriers to productive adulthood (Wertheimer, 2002). In 1988, 38 percent of those that aged out of foster care were emotionally disturbed, 50 percent used illegal drugs, and 25 percent were involved with the legal system. Only 48 percent of the youth had graduated from high school. Two years after leaving foster care only 38 percent of youth had stayed employed and only 48 percent had ever held full-time jobs.

The Need for Alternative Education

As the previous sections indicate, there is much evidence that adolescents and youth who are disconnected from mainstream institutions and opportunities are likely suffer significant, often long-term, negative effects as they enter adulthood. Many of these youth may reconnect to education and/or identify ways they can be productive and creative if given the opportunity to do so through alternative education strategies and settings. Such schools and programs are intended to serve this population and there are a variety of program models operating around the country. [1]

There are no consistent estimates of the number of youth in alternative education programs or schools. However, while data are generally not available about alternative education programs outside the regular K-12 system, there are survey data on youth enrolled in alternative education in or through public, private, and Catholic K-12 schools.

Alternative Schools – Who is Being Reached?

Heeding the cautions raised about not creating dumping grounds for problem youth, it is clear that mainstream education and public systems are not adequately meeting the needs of all high-risk youth, and the difficulties vulnerable youth have in regular schools may exacerbate their disconnections. Many alternative schools settings attempt to reach youth who are outside the regular education system, whether they left the mainstream by choice or through punishment strategies. High quality alternative environments can support the positive development of truants, suspended or expelled students, students being reintegrated from the juvenile justice system, and dropouts (Ingersoll & Leboeuf, 1997). The nature of such settings (e.g., small class sizes, personalized attention, support services) create environments in which these youth may be more comfortable and may

[1] For a review of alternative education school and program models, see the companion paper, *Towards A Typology Of Alternative Education: A Compilation Of Elements From the Literature*, by Laudan Y. Aron and Janine M. Zweig (Urban Institute, April 2003).

mean that youth pursue their education further as a result (see sidebar 1 for an example of how alternative schools assist youth in Iowa).

Sidebar 1: Alternative Schools to Assist Dropouts in Iowa

According to Iowa state code, school districts are required to provide dropouts with alternative programming to assist them in completing a high school education. As a result, 98 alternative schools have been developed to do just this in 75 counties and across 294 school districts. Sixty-three districts collaborate with community colleges to enhance high school education with career planning, vocational training, work placement, and post secondary education planning.

The Iowa Association of Alternative Education reports about two-thirds of those that graduate from the alternative school setting are employed, 37 percent go on to some type of post secondary training, 3 to 4 percent are college students, and 3 to 4 percent are in the military. The unemployment rate for these graduates is not different than the rate for graduates of traditional high schools. Further, approximately 24 percent of the alternative school graduates are involved in voting processes and volunteer organizations as compared to 14 percent of their same age peer group in Iowa.

Source: Iowa Association of Alternative Education, 2002

Some alternative education programs are operated by or through regular schools or school districts. Although they are rapidly growing in number throughout the United States, the total number of operating alternative schools is unclear (Clearinghouse on Education Management, accessed 2003). There is no comprehensive inventory of these schools and no complete count of the number and types of youth attending them (National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices, 2001). However, the District Survey of Alternative Schools and Programs supported by NCES is an important, though limited source of data. The Survey documents the number and types of alternative schools and programs for vulnerable youth available through the public school system (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Although the survey leaves out alternative schools in private and/or nonprofit settings, it represents the first survey ever of its kind.

Number of Alternative Schools through School Districts

Conducted in 2001, the Survey of Alternative Schools and Programs includes a nationally representative sample of 1,534 public school districts. Students in alternative schools and programs reported in this survey were generally there because they were at risk of failing, as defined by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or other factors known to be indicators of leaving school early.

Thirty-nine percent of public school districts had at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students in grades 1 through 12 representing 10,900 such programs

during the 2000-01 school year (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Of those districts reporting at-risk programming, such programs were offered to secondary level students in 88 to 92 percent of the districts, to middle school level students in 46 to 67 percent of the districts, and to elementary level students in 10 to 21 percent of the districts. Urban school districts, districts with high minority student populations, and districts with high poverty rates were more likely than other districts to have such programs. Over half of these programs were delivered in separate facilities than in the regular school buildings and 4 percent were in juvenile detention centers, 3 percent were in community centers, and 1 percent were charter schools.

Despite the number of school districts with such programs, survey results indicate that there does not seem to be enough alternative school and programming slots for the number of youth who require them (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Fifty-four percent of school districts with such programming reported demand exceeded their capacity for services within the last three years and thirty-three percent were unable to enroll new students into the alternative educational options during the 1999-2000 school year. Most districts resolved this short fall by developing waiting lists for their programs.

The Student Population in Alternative Schools

Students attending alternative school settings (whether through school districts or not) have a number of characteristics that distinguish them from those in the mainstream education system. Typical populations of students in alternatives schools are: dropouts, students with disabilities, and students participating in health risk behaviors (Lange & Sletten, 2002). About 200,000 students in public schools in grades 9-12 (about 1.3 percent of all students in those grades) were enrolled in such programs in October 2000 (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Of these, about 12 percent were special education students. About 80,000 additional at-risk teens were in alternative education through private and Catholic schools (Grunbaum, et al, 1999).

More youth attending alternative schools participate in health risk behaviors than youth in mainstream education settings. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) implements the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBS), a biennial survey conducted on odd years to assess the extent to which youth take health related risks. The YRBS is a nationally representative sample of American students attending mainstream educational settings. In 1998, the CDC included a special YRBS, interviewing a nationally representative sample of youth attending alternative high schools in the United States (Grunbaum et al., 1999). The sample included public, private, and Catholic schools reporting having alternative education and at least one of grades 9-12. The schools sampled also were not operating as a "school within a school," and reported serving youth at risk for dropping out of regular high school. In total, 8,919 students participated in the study in 115 schools. Five schools served pregnant teenagers, 13 schools served adjudicated students, 17 schools served students with emotional or behavioral problems, and 80 served multiple types of students.

The results of the 1998 YRBS of alternative schools are compared here to the results of the 1997 YRBS of mainstream educational settings[2] (Kann et al., 1998), highlighting the relative severity of vulnerability and risk reported by students in alternative education:

- Approximately 33 percent of alternative school students reported that they had carried a weapon at least once during the 30 days before the survey, compared to 18 percent of students from mainstream settings.
- About 15 percent of students in alternative schools carried guns while only 6 percent did so in mainstream settings.
- Approximately 60 percent of students in alternative schools reported being in at least one physical fight during the year before the survey compared to approximately 37 percent of students in mainstream settings.
- Approximately 11 percent of alternative school students reported they had missed at least one day of school during the 30 days before the survey because they felt unsafe at school or traveling to or from school, compared to only 4 percent of students in mainstream settings.
- Approximately 16 percent of alternative school students and 7 percent of mainstream students had been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property in the year before the survey.
- Approximately 25 percent of alternative school students and 21 percent of mainstream students had suicide ideation during the year before the survey.
- About 16 percent of alternative school students and 8 percent of mainstream students reported that they had attempted suicide one or more times the year before the survey.
- In alternative school settings, approximately 64 percent of the students had smoked cigarettes on at least one of the 30 days before the survey and approximately 45 percent of students had done so on 20 or more days of the past 30 days. In contrast, approximately 36 percent of the students in mainstream settings had smoked cigarettes on at least one of the 30 days before the survey and only 17 percent of students had done so on 20 or more days of the past 30 days.
- Approximately 65 percent of the alternative school students reported having had at least one drink of alcohol on at least one of the 30 days before the survey and approximately 50 percent of students had drank 5 or more drinks in a row on one or more days. Approximately 51 percent of the mainstream students had at least one drink of alcohol on at least one of the 30 days before the survey and approximately 33 percent of students had drank 5 or more drinks in a row on one or more days.
- Approximately, 53 percent of alternative school students reported using marijuana one or more times during the 30 days before the survey and 26 percent of mainstream students did the same.
- Approximately 15 percent of alternative school students and 3 percent of mainstream students reported using some form of cocaine one or more times during the 30 days before survey.

[2] The 1997 YRBS included a total of 16,262 students from 151 schools.

- Approximately 88 percent of alternative school students and 48 percent of mainstream students reported having had sexual intercourse during their lifetime.
- Twenty-two percent of alternative school students had sexual intercourse before age 13 and 50 percent had sexual intercourse with four or more partners. In contrast, 7 percent of mainstream students had sexual intercourse before age 13 and 16 percent had sexual intercourse with four or more partners.[3]
- Thirty percent of alternative school students and 7 percent of mainstream students reported they had been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant.

The above data highlight the vulnerability of youth who attend alternative schools. These youth encounter problems with violence, substance use, and risky sexual behavior as well as pregnancy. The issues they face should not be ignored by the systems serving them.

Alternative Schools as Service Providers

Recognizing the special needs of the student population in alternative schools for at-risk and vulnerable youth, many schools become service providers or facilitate services provided outside the school setting. Having youth enrolled in the alternative setting creates a genuine opportunity to reach out to the youth and address needs whether they are related to family environments, educational problems, or health issues.

The points at which youth disconnect from typical developmental pathways and the problems they encounter with health risk behaviors represent points of service and collaboration for alternative schools and programs interviewed in the NCES Survey of Public Alternative School Programs (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Although not all such programs participated in collaborations to address the needs of their students:

- 84 percent collaborate with the juvenile justice system,
- 75 percent collaborate with mental health agencies,
- 70 percent collaborate with law enforcement,
- 69 percent collaborate with child protective services,
- 65 percent collaborate with health and human services agencies or hospitals,
- 59 percent collaborate with substance abuse treatment agencies,
- 47 percent collaborate with crisis intervention centers,
- 46 percent collaborate with family planning/child care/child placement agencies, and
- 40 percent collaborate with job placement agencies.

Importantly, 72 percent of public alternative schools and programs reported collaborating with five or more other community agencies in providing services to their students.

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[3] Youth who have sex before age 14 are much more likely than youth who initiate sexual intercourse later in adolescence to have done so involuntarily (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994). As a result, a large number of youth attending alternative schools may have experienced sexual victimization.

While not all students in public alternative schools are offered connections to services that could help them, many schools try to provide such assistance. If alternative school settings are sincerely attempting to meet the needs of the student population, then connections to service providers seem critical to assist youth in overcoming their barriers to education.

Extent of Need

Thus, disconnected—at risk, vulnerable—youth are a primary target group for alternative education schools and programs. There is a general sense in the youth development community that there is a great need for alternative education for 16 to 24 year old vulnerable youth, and that currently much of the need is not being met. While there are no precise estimates of the need, very rough calculations using Census and other available data confirm that the scope of the problem is indeed large, particularly for those 16 to 24 year olds who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school diploma or GED.

There are no consistent estimates of the number of disconnected youth, mainly because various analysts and experts focus on different dimensions of the issue and population—by age group, school enrollment, economic status, or developmental stages, for example. To help provide an idea of the potential scale of the problem among 16 to 24 year olds, rough calculations were made, extrapolating from existing relevant data and research.[4] In general, based on literature and research, the percentage of youth that might be considered high risk, disconnected or vulnerable, ranges from a low estimate of about 13 percent to a high estimate of perhaps 30 percent. This suggests 5 to 10 million 16 to 24 year olds may be disconnected, split about evenly between 16 to 19 year olds and 20 to 24 year olds.

Presumably, all these vulnerable youth might benefit from special interventions or services, either in regular high schools or alternative schools and programs. Based on literature and reports, it appears, though, that only a small share of these vulnerable youth are receiving alternative education, and that services for the older group of vulnerable youth is particularly limited.

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[4] These calculations were made using a number of assumptions and extrapolating from available data: **(A) 16 to 19 year olds**—perhaps 2-5 million 16 to 19 year olds (13-30% of all 16 to 19 year olds) are "vulnerable (e.g., 13% of 17 year olds are functionally illiterate and 30% of 8th graders are below basic math/reading levels [NAEP]); about 280,000 high school students (1.3% of all students grade 9-12) are in alternative education in public, private and Catholic schools (ALT-YRBS 1998 and NCES Survey 2002-2004); fewer than 1 million 16 to 19 year olds are in non-school alternative education (51,000 in Job Corps; 80,000 in juvenile residential facilities; and perhaps 50,000 [assumes 1.3% of all out-of school 16 to 19 year olds) may be in community based organization or other programs]. **(B) 20 to 24 year olds**—2.5 million 20 to 24 year olds (13% of all 20 to 24 year olds) are not in school and lack a high school diploma or GED (Census); fewer than 100,000 are in alternative education (45,000 in Job Corps, and perhaps 30,000 [assumes 1.3% of all 20 to 24 year olds not in school and lacking a high school diploma or GED] in community based organization or other programs.

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Rough Estimates of the Number Of Vulnerable Youth in Alternative Education

	16-19 year olds at risk	20-24 year olds at risk
Total estimated number of at risk youth	2 to 5 million (100%)	2 to 5 million (100%)
• Estimated number of at-risk youth in alternative programs through public, private, Catholic regular schools	280,000 (6-14% of all at-risk youth)	0 (0% of all at-risk youth)
• Estimated number of at-risk youth in education at Job Corps centers	51,000 (3-9% of all at-risk youth)	45,000 (2-9% of all at-risk youth)
• Estimated number of at-risk youth in education at Juvenile Justice residential facilities	80,000 (2-4% of all at-risk youth)	0 (0% of all at-risk youth)
• Estimated number of at-risk youth in other alternative education (e.g., CBOs, treatment facilities, etc.)	50,000 (approximate) (1-3% of all at-risk youth)	50,000 (approximate) (1-3% of all at-risk youth)
Total approximate number of at risk youth in alternative education (% of all at-risk)	~500,000 (10-25% of all at-risk youth)	~100,000 (2-5% of all at-risk youth)

This suggests that of the approximately 5 to 10 million 16 to 24 year olds who might be considered "high-risk" (e.g., basic skills deficient, high school dropouts, out of school and not employed) fewer than 1 million (or 10 to 20 percent) are currently in alternative education programs or schools.

CONCLUSIONS

Many youth are disconnected from mainstream agencies and typical developmental pathways leaving them vulnerable to economic and social hardship. These youth are at risk of not completing high school and/or being limited in the extent to which they can fulfill adult roles and responsibilities.

Some alternative school settings may be one way vulnerable youth become disconnected from mainstream agencies. These settings may be used as ways to divert problematic youth from mainstream schools and programs. However, other alternative school settings may be a way for youth to *reconnect* to their education to improve their chances of successful transition to adulthood. Although no comprehensive inventory of both public and private alternative school settings exists, these programs have been on the rise. It is clear that despite increases in such programming, the vast majority of youth in need of alternative approaches to education are not currently being reached.

Because alternative schools are a relatively new approach to addressing the needs of vulnerable youth, a number of questions remain about how they affect the system, the scope of their reach, and their utility in assisting youth who are at risk. Important issues to consider include:

- This review has shown there is no comprehensive inventory of alternative approaches for vulnerable youth. Outstanding questions include: How many alternative schools and programs are there in the country, including both public and private schools, and nonprofit community-based organizations? What is the extent of need relative to the number of options available to youth?

- It is critical to review the extent to which alternative school settings represent barriers or opportunities to educational success. To what extent are youth who are expelled from mainstream settings allowed to re-enroll in regular school? How many expelled youth do not have alternative schools as options? Are alternative approaches effective at reconnecting youth to mainstream systems and agencies and should this be the goal for such settings?

- Some experts and observers in the field believe that the movement toward high stakes testing, similar to zero-tolerance policies regarding behavior, contributes to vulnerable youth being pushed out of mainstream schools. Does high stakes testing in schools affect the number of youth being transferred out of mainstream settings, the number of youth graduating from school, and/or the number of youth dropping out of school? If so, how does this affect schools and vulnerable youth? What are the unintended consequences and benefits of high stakes testing for high-risk youth?

The reviews in the previous sections of this paper confirm the severity of the problem. Many youth development experts believe that students who leave the education system early as a result of choice or punishment become disconnected from society, losing much more than their diploma and a chance for economic productivity (Fred Newman of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools as seen in Boss, 1998). It is important to keep these children in school as the cost of such problems, to society and to the youth themselves, is high. Youth without adequate skills will lack the ability to successfully transition to independent adulthood and to maintain secure employment. They advocate that as a society we must recognize that school failure translates into life failure (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001).

While much is known about youth developmental stages and risk factors that hinder positive development, less is known about how many alternative education programs and schools currently exist, how many students attend the programs and schools, how alternative education schools, programs, and strategies are addressing the educational and developmental needs of youth, or how effective they are in terms of improving youth outcomes. Filling these research gaps would help identify appropriate policies and strategies to meet this great societal need.

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